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## **The Middle East in global history**

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# The Middle East in Global History

**In the spring term of 2017, the public lecture series “The Middle East in Global History – Global History in the Middle East” dedicated to the role of the Middle East in Global History took place at the Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies. The event was organized within the framework of the Inter-University Doctoral Cooperation in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies (MUBIT), which unites the departments of Islamic/Middle Eastern Studies at the Universities of Zurich, Basel, and Bern. The event’s conveners were Ulrich Brandenburg and Helena Rust.**

Eliza Isabaeva

In the lectures, three invited speakers explored different facets of global entanglements involving the Middle East, and offered insights into their research. The first speaker was Liat Kozma, Senior Lecturer in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, followed by David Motadel, Assistant Professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science. A lecture by Umar Ryad, Associate Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Utrecht, concluded the series. Each of the lectures was followed on the next morning by an in-depth discussion, for which researchers and students prepared with a text written and chosen by the lecturers.

## Women in migration

Liat Kozma’s lecture entitled “Prostitution and Migration in the Interwar Mediterranean” looked at the important role of women in migration across the Mediterranean in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and was largely based on her research in the League of Nations archives. She addressed four main questions about the migration of female prostitutes: why, where, who and how. The “why” question situ-

ated migratory prostitutes within the larger migratory trends of the time, revealing that most of the prostitutes seemed to have migrated willingly. Although they generally needed the assistance of a male procurer to subvert the restrictions on female movement, seeing migration of prostitutes as trafficking is highly questionable. The “where” question examined the three cities—Istanbul, Marseille and Port Said—that were the major hubs of migration and transit points of migratory flows. The “who” explored different categories of prostitutes, brothel keepers, and procurers within the prostitution trade who mutually depended on each other. Finally, the “how” question examined the methods which served to subvert state regulations and restrictions on the movement of “undesirables” such as prostitutes.

The discussion with Kozma on the following day circled around a chapter from her recent book “Global Women, Colonial Ports: Prostitution in the Interwar Middle East” (SUNY Press 2017). An important point of discussion was the issue of Mediterranean identity, which the migratory prostitutes arguably represented in crossing the borders of several countries in the Mediterranean region. The participants found the author’s approach of “zooming into” and “zooming out” from particular contexts to be helpful for analyzing historical events, processes, and actors, because the approach enabled them not only to look at particular phenomena, but also to compare them with one another. Furthermore, the difference between the notions of trafficking women and female migration was emphasized. While the former, morally charged one obscured the active role of the women in migratory decisions, the

latter one allowed for an open discussion about women who possessed decision-making power in transnational movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Royal representations

International relations and their symbolic representations were at the heart of David Motadel’s presentation. His lecture focused on the trips of two Iranian monarchs Nasir al-Din Shah and Muzaffar al-Din Shah to the European capitals St. Petersburg, Berlin, Vienna, London, Brussels, and Paris. Nasir al-Din Shah (in 1873, 1878, and 1889) as well as Muzaffar al-Din (in 1900, 1902, and 1905) each made three trips to Eu-

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**The history of Muslims in Europe is thus still an underexplored field that offers the potential to shed light on hitherto largely obscure aspects of 20<sup>th</sup> century developments and debates.**

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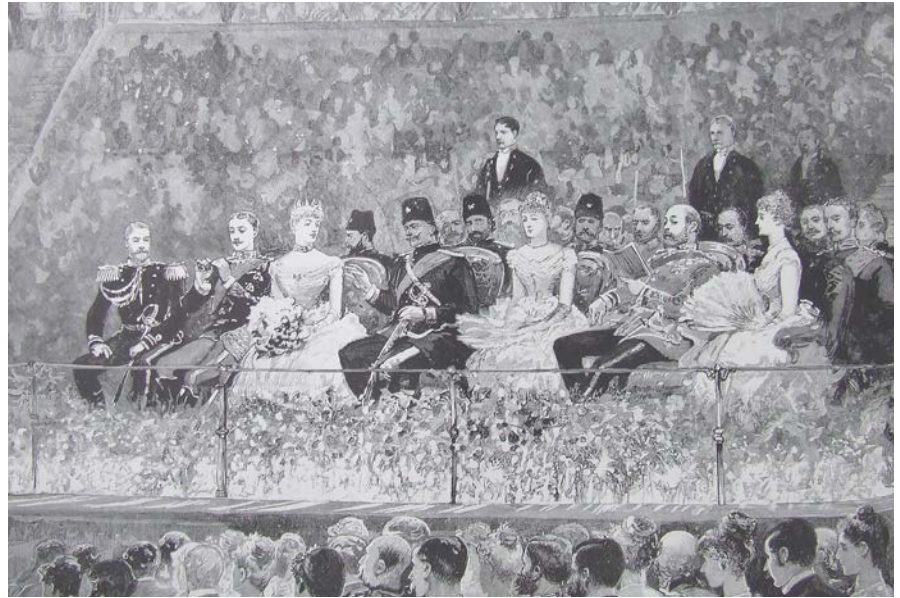
rope, where they met with their European counterparts. As Motadel argued, the main mission of the Iranian royals was to represent their country to the monarchs in Europe and to achieve a kind of “ceremonial Europeanization.” But also European monarchs and diplomats had to get used to their unfamiliar visitors, adapting their rituals to what they perceived as Iranian customs. However, as Motadel described, attention for Iranian visitors also decreased over time. While the first visit of Nasir al-Din Shah was celebrated as a grandiose event in several European cities and left its traces in popular culture, later receptions tended to be much more modest. However, the trips of the Iranian

Shahs to Europe were a useful tool for the non-European monarchs through which they could place royal birth above ethnicity and demonstrate the legitimacy of their rule and the sovereignty of their country.

The next morning, the discussion focused on a draft for an introductory chapter of an edited volume entitled "Struggles for Sovereignty: Europe and the Non-European Powers in the Imperial Age," which Motadel will publish together with Houchang Chehabi (Boston University, forthcoming). The chapter dealt with the strategies that a number of independent non-European countries employed in the age of imperialism to assert their rights and independence within the unequal sphere of international law. The participants' expertise lay mostly in the field of Japanese history and thus outside of Motadel's immediate area of research, which greatly enriched the discussion. A controversial point was the dichotomy "European" vs. "non-European," which participants sought to deconstruct by suggesting alternatives that focused more on status nuances in international law or questions of citizenship in order to add a perspective "from below."

#### Pan-islamic networks

Umar Ryad delivered the final lecture, entitled "The Hajj and European Imperial Powers: Between Pan-Islam, the Cholera, Shipping Trade." This lecture dealt with different perceptions of the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca from a European point of view in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ryad stressed that the Hajj was a global religious enterprise and outlined several fields in which Europeans struggled for influence and control over the Muslim pilgrimage. On the one hand, European empires feared the growth of pan-Islamic networks, which were seen as a possible challenge to colonial rule in the Middle East and Asia. The Hajj



The Iranian monarch Nasir al-Din Shah with the royal family in the Royal Albert Hall, London.

united Muslims from all over the world, and was regarded as a particularly important force in the creation of such networks. On the other hand, economic motives created more positive impressions of the Hajj, providing considerable opportunity for European shipping companies and travel agencies. Again a source of unease, matters of public health and the prevention of diseases like cholera were another impetus for European involvement in organizing the pilgrimage and setting up quarantine stations. Ryad looked at these topics with a particular focus on the Netherlands and its Mecca travelers P.H. van der Hoog and Snouck Hurgronje, demonstrating how even a smaller European country showed considerable interest in the Hajj.

On the following morning, Ryad discussed the topic of Muslims in Europe, based on the introductory chapter from his co-edited volume "Muslims in Interwar Europe: A Transcultural Historical Perspective" (Brill 2016). Examining the activities of Muslim activists and intellectuals who lived in Europe, the authors of the edited volume argued for an understanding of the European past that goes beyond seeing Muslims as the "other." In

fact, Europe was an attractive destination for Arab and Muslim students, revolutionaries, nationalist activists, political exiles, and intellectuals. The discussion focused on Rashid Rida, Shakib Arslan, and especially Zeki Kiram. Relatively unknown to history, Zeki Kiram was a former Ottoman-Arab officer who took up residence in Berlin after the First World War. Ryad demonstrated how, through careful historiographic work and the usage of family archives, one can find astonishing links with better-known Muslim figures in Europe. The history of Muslims in Europe is thus still an under-explored field that offers the potential to shed light on hitherto largely obscure aspects of 20<sup>th</sup> century developments and debates.

The organizers of the lecture series sought to add a Middle Eastern perspective to the history of the globalizing world. Each lecture provided fascinating insights into the entanglements between the Middle East and the wider world. Sarah Khayati, who joined the lecture and discussion with Umar Ryad from the University of Basel, aptly summarized the event as "a wonderful opportunity for finding inspiration and connecting with innovative scholars."